"What's the point if it isn't marked?" Trainee teachers' responses to concepts of authentic engagement with poetry text.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to consider the issue of 'authentic engagement' with texts in the context of KS3 and KS4 classroom English teaching. This article describes an exemplar session on the poem *A Fine Romance* by Roger McGough designed to elicit authentic engagement and provoke personal responses, and reports on the perceptions of the five pedagogic approaches used by 12 PGCE English trainees. These perceptions were gathered through both guided personal reflection and group discussion, and encouraged the trainees to consider the pedagogies as both learners and teachers. The article discusses the implication of the trainees' perceptions and the potential impact of these perceptions on their future classroom practice.

[Key words: authentic engagement, personal response, English literature, poetry, texts]

Introduction

At the 2018 National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE) Initial Teacher Education (ITE) symposium, I was fortunate to be able to hear a presentation by Jessica Mason and Marcello Giovanelli regarding authentic engagement with texts. I found this particularly potent, resonating as it did with my experience of lesson content during the round of school observations on trainee Secondary School English teachers that I had just completed. It struck me that in no lesson had I witnessed authentic engagement by pupils with any text. Instead, as far down the school as Year 7, teachers were instructing pupils in an analytical approach that was highly reductionist. Barbara Bleiman, from the English and Media Centre, spoke about asking pupils whether they 'liked' a text, and again I was struck by having to introduce this concept to the teaching of English. Surely, authentic engagement and a personal response to texts should be at the heart of English teaching? However, the fact that these concepts were being discussed at an ITE symposium (and the need for that

discussion was agreed by the teacher educators in the room) suggests that this may no longer be the case.

This study is a small exploration of the understanding of authentic engagement with, and personal response to, the poem *A Fine Romance* by Roger McGough, undertaken with a group of twelve PGCE Secondary English trainees. It aims to reflect their perceptions of these concepts, and to start to explore why they seem to be using them so seldom in the lessons that they teach. Finally, it questions whether experience of an authentic engagement lesson, and reflection on its usefulness, has any impact on the trainees' teaching practices.

Literature

This study explores the concept of authentic engagement with text (Giovanelli and Mason 2015) and specifically how the experience of such engagement influences trainee secondary English teachers' perceptions of the teaching of poetry. 'Authentic engagement' in this context is defined as, 'a reading that is born out of an individual's own process of unmediated interpretation [where there is] space to interpret the text, to experience it for themselves' (Giovanelli and Mason, 2015 p. 42).

Mason and Giovanelli argue that the English classroom is one where teachers and pupils are 'unequal' (Fairclough, 2014) in their experiences of text. Teachers, it can be expected, are already familiar with the texts to be studied, but pupils may be approaching the text for the first time. This results in the inequality of the re-reader (teacher) and the first-time reader (pupil) which may result in the teacher influencing which interpretations of a text are legitimate. This may be done by 'foregrounding' certain aspects (Giovanelli and Mason, 2015, p.45), leading to the teacher deciding on the relative importance of elements of the text, and to a reading that not authentically experienced. Elements of lesson that may lead to pre-figured reading include the sharing of lesson and/or assessment objectives, contextual information and teacher-led interpretations (Cushing, 2018).

Equally, the first-time encounter with a text is one that can never be repeated. It is only once that the reader can be misled as to the identity of Pip's benefactor in Great Expectations, or the audience member believe that Edward's change of heart in Act V of King Lear may actually save Cordelia. These 'authentic' interactions with the text as the author created it should be valued and respected. Pre-figuring of the students' attention to certain aspects of the text (Giovanelli and Mason, 2015; Mason and Giovanelli, 2017) may 'mean that the vast range of resources and ideas, and possible connections and interpretations that students might

be willing to make' may be lost (Mason and Giovanelli, 2017, p.320). It may also, quite simply, ruin the plot.

Cushing (2018) argues that poetry has been particularly negatively impacted by the 'teach to the exam' mentality that he sees pervading the current English classroom. Teachers, he suggests, may find themselves acting as 'gatekeepers to meaning' (Xerri, 2013) with poetry being reduced to 'puzzles' that have 'right' or 'wrong' answers (e.g. Dymoke, 2003). He argues for a Text World approach (Gavins, 2007; Werth, 1999), where 'A central tenet … is the metaphor A TEXT IS A WORLD' an approach that 'aims to account for how participants (readers and hearers) combine language and background knowledge to construct such worlds' (Cushing, 2018 p.10). The importance of these 'worlds' lies far beyond dissection of how they are achieved. As Rosenblatt argued as early as 1932, 'the human element cannot be banished' (Rosenblatt, 1932, in 2005, p.26) and, 'a key purpose of the literature teacher's role in the classroom is to construct a literary "experience", rather than a simple transmission of knowledge' (Cushing, 2018, p.8). An 'authentic engagement' in this context, allows the poet to speak directly to the reader or listener, and for the reader or listener to make their unique meaning-response to that poem, drawing on their own experience and understanding. This personal engagement, Giovanelli and Mason argue, is the opposite of what happens if interpretation is imposed on students:

> 'The resultant reading is likely not to be authentic, but manufactured. Manufactured readings are learnt, not made; they occur when readers are denied the space to engage in their own process of interpretation' (Giovanelli and Mason, 2015, p.42).

Research design

This study makes use of a case study of the teaching of a KS3 poetry lesson to Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) trainee teachers. The lesson was taught as an exemplar lesson for the trainees to experience, and then their responses to the various elements of the lesson gathered through anonymous written guided reflection. The trainees then had the opportunity to discuss their reactions and ideas in both small- and whole- group.

The design was positioned to allow the trainees to consider the teacher's influence on the first-time encounter with a text. It aimed to challenge them to consider the way they might pre-figuring aspects of a text as being 'more important' through bringing those to the fore, the mode through which literature is first encountered, the extent to which space for personal and emotional response to a text is enabled and the extent to which pupils are supported to

evaluate text for themselves. This final element was extended into consideration of an 'off school' activity.

Five strategies were used to address these objectives and to attempt to extract an 'authentic engagement' with the poem under consideration:

1. The trainees were not given a context or learning objective for the session, nor was there a direct teacher-led element before the text was encountered. This aimed to avoid foregrounding of the 'purpose' of the session with the trainees. Instead, various artefacts and images were made available around the room for the trainees to explore. These included a factual scientific article about amyloid plaques (NIH, 2013) and data regarding Alzheimer's dementia (Medi-link, 2017), a first-person magazine article account by someone recently diagnosed with dementia (alz.org, 2014), a black and white wedding photograph (personal) and printed extract from the Church of England marriage service (Church of England, 2000), a pair of glasses, a book and picture of an elderly dog (personal).

2. The poem was played to the trainees performed by the author, Roger McGough (YouTube: Alzheimer's Association, 2014). It was then played a further two times with the screen turned off, on audio only. No written version of the text was made available.

3. The trainees were invited to spend some time (5 – 7 minutes) in private writing in response to the poem. It was made clear that this writing would not be shared with anyone and was entirely for their own use.

4. The poem was then discussed in small groups in response to the question, 'Do you like the poem?' Trainees were invited to indicate any parts or images that they found particularly powerful. The poem was played again (audio only) at this time.

5. Trainees were told that homework from this session would have been (for a KS3 class) to look at anthologies or go on-line and find 'a poem that they liked'. Pupils would be informed that whether the homework had been done of not would not be checked.

Research ethics permission was obtained before the commencement of the study. The session formed part of the trainees' usual seminar learning, with reflection and discussion used to support their development as trainee teachers. Informed consent was sought and obtained for data from the session to be used for research, with an 'opt in' approach being

chosen as being most appropriate. Feedback from the study and discussion on its findings formed part of a later session.

Rationale

The artefacts and pictures were an attempt – one that was not entirely successful – to introduce the subject matter of the poem without 'fore-grounding' any particular aspect. There is a danger, argue Mason and Giovanelli (2017) that as teachers we indicate what is 'important' in a text before pupils have had a chance to encounter it, through articulating Learning Objectives or via verbal introduction. The artefacts and pictures aimed to replace this, allowing the subject matter to emerge through the trainees' encounters with them. The magazine account introduced the idea of a first-person narrative of dementia and the scientific description of amyloid plaques and the data regarding dementia introduced factual material. The various visual images carried a certain amount of emotional currency with them although none was specific. However, some elements of 'foregrounding' nevertheless occurred. The very presence of the artefacts pre-figured the poem, and raised the subject of dementia and of Alzheimer's in particular. The poem itself never actually explicitly mentions either, so the artefacts and pictures, whilst attempting to remove the teacher from the position of unequal power as described by Fairclough (2014), nevertheless betray the teacher's position and can be seen to be a form of fore-grounding in themselves.

The 'authentic engagement' with the text through hearing it rather than reading it was a deliberate decision to move away from written text and specifically from the practice of 'text annotation' which has become so common in classrooms. The 'deadening effect' of the way that poetry may be taught in schools (Dymoke, 2003) may, as suggested by Gordon (2004) be at least in part due to the way that 'the orality of poetry is sometimes overlooked at the point of first Encounter' (p. 97). Gordon suggests that meaning in literature differs in different modalities, and that providing different modes of encounter for pupils other than in text form may enrich a curriculum that is otherwise 'in thrall to print and writing' (p.101). Roger McGough's association with the Mersey Sound (Henry, 1967), performance poetry and radio poetry (Poetry Please, BBC Radio 4) suggested that this approach could be 'authentic' for this poem. The authenticity may have been more powerful than intended; the trainees did not recognise Roger McGough, and encountered the poem as the direct, to-camera speaking by an 'old man', speaking in the first person (McGough was 72 when he made the recording). This lack of familiarity with McGough was unanticipated at the lesson-preparation stage.

The 'private writing' time was intended to enable intense, personal engagement with the poem completely separated from any concept of 'right or wrong' responses, and without any input from the teacher to suggest that any response to the poem was more legitimate than any other. It built on Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory (e.g. 1938, 1978) which argues for the importance of the individual reader's response. There is, Rosenblatt argued, no one 'right' response to any piece of literature, as the experience of it relies on interplay between the individual reader, the text and, through the text, the author. The personal writing time element of the session aimed to enable space for this meaning-making by the trainees, each of whom brought different experiences and understanding to the poem.

Small group discussion centred around the question, 'Do you like the poem?' This built on ideas emerging from the ongoing research project, It's Good to Talk (English and Media Centre, n.d.), undertaken by Barbara Bleiman and Kate Oliver. This project involves investigative, open-ended research into the purpose and effects of group discussion in English lessons. At a recent presentation (NATE ITE Symposium, British Library, 15th November 2018), the concept of using the question, 'Do you like it?' as a topic for poetry was discussed, and so was chosen for this lesson.

The non-marked, non-checked homework assignment around finding a poem that the students 'liked' followed on from this concept. The hidden agenda of this task – that a pupil might like a poem, might make judgements that they liked one poem more than others, might recognise that judgement even without articulating it, might take 'ownership' of a poem – was not discussed with the trainees at this stage. However, the idea did build on a previous discussion with the trainees about the power and purpose of work that was offered to and by pupils voluntarily. In a previous session they had explored the idea of inviting narrative or descriptive writing by pupils to emerge from lesson time, which would not be marked and was not compulsory, but which they as teachers would be 'happy to read'. The trainees were therefore familiar with the concept of pupils' sharing elements of English purely out of enthusiasm rather than as a compulsory set homework task.

Responses

1.   The resources

Reflective prompts:

How did this material make you feel?

In what way was this different from telling you the poem would be about dementia?

Trainees articulated that they found the resources 'immersive and engaging' and that looking at them was like 'looking at fragments of somebody's life'. The wedding photograph was identified as powerful in a number of responses. One trainee identified that the artefacts gave 'insight into a different perspective' and another that they 'made me think about what makes somebody who they are'. As trainee teachers they were able to identify that this approach might enable learners to have autonomy, reflecting this with comments such as, 'it [gave me] ownership over the knowledge I was gathering', 'feelings were natural responses rather than orchestrated' and '[it is] more moving … to discover … than to be told'. Interestingly, despite their own relative youth, not all trainees responded to the subject matter as being about someone else, one responding that 'I could imagine [dementia] as a prospect', and 'I was shocked, particularly when looking at statistics on Alzheimer's'. Although the majority opinion seemed to be that the approach 'allowed a more full engagement', some trainees were less positive, one indicating that 'without knowing the activity, I didn't really fully read [the materials]' and another that the 'factual information made me feel nothing'.

2.   Hearing the poem read by the author

Reflective prompts:

How did you feel about the poem on first hearing it?

What was the effect of using the medium of the author reading the poem as first experience of it, rather than the teacher reading it or pupils reading it to themselves?

As discussed above, trainees did not identify the author and were not aware at first encounter with the poem that the speaker was the writer, or whether he has dementia himself. The first-person form of the poem was therefore fully immediate.

There was some concern expressed by the trainees about the practicalities of hearing, rather than reading, the text, specifically that 'it was very quick when I heard it'. This issue could, another trainee suggested, have been reduced 'if you had highlighted that we would be hearing it again before we listened the first time', which is a useful and practical suggestion. Hearing the poem in the voice of the poet – once this was explained as being the case – was mostly positively received: '[it] allows the audience to hear the poem as he intended it to be read', '[it] is more personal' and '[it] gives it more authenticity'. That said, one trainee raised a note of caution, '[the author's voice] can narrow some thinking as the way it is read is the

'right way'', and another suggested that it 'could have been read by anyone'. Hearing rather than reading the poem was described as 'immediate', with one trainee suggesting that '[hearing it] can concentrate the language', and others recognising the power in it of 'the first-person point of view', the 'real voice' and the 'raw experience'. This raw experience was, to some, 'uncomfortable … like reading someone else's diary', with another trainee articulating that 'hearing [reference to] "another's name" really affected me; hearing [rather than reading] was more engaging'.

3.   Private writing

Reflective prompts:

Did you find this personal writing useful or helpful? Do you think this writing helped you to engage in any way with the poem?

Why use valuable lesson time in an activity that has no immediate, tangible benefit?

Some trainees seemed to struggle to find value in this activity or were confused by it within a lesson context. One asked, rhetorically, 'What would you do if someone went, "I don't care about his – I'm not doing it" or messed about?', another commented 'I didn't find it useful for the lesson', another that she 'did not enjoy the opportunity', and yet another that 'it is not useful for assessment'. That said, this same last trainee articulated that during this activity 'I made links to the poem that I didn't realise I remembered' and suggested that it might allow students to 'awaken an emotional response to a text that they would not have tried to connect with otherwise'.

Many trainees articulated that the activity was 'liberating', 'worthwhile' and 'truthful'; they indicated that it 'enabled [them] to put ideas into words', that it was 'both useful and helpful' and that a 'personal response is always beneficial'. One indicated that she 'appreciated the space and safety' although another raised the importance of an established, trusting relationship: 'Had the session been led by someone else I am not sure I would trust that this writing would stay private'. Other comments included that 'you could write with no fear of judgement', 'it enables students to understand their own feelings' and 'writing for myself [made me] feel less self-conscious'.

4.   'Did you like the poem?' Sharing an emotional response (working in small groups)

Reflective prompts:

Did you find it easy to identify emotions, and to find where and how they were presented in the poem? Did finding the writer's stylistic approaches to these emotions help you? Why concentrate on emotion, and only ask for stylistic/literary techniques that support emotion?

Some trainees made the transition to discussing the poem, including considering the poet's use of form and technique, relatively seamless. One responded, 'I think the word "like" made me think of how I felt about the poem; I think it enabled understanding', and another that 'I found it helpful as we were talking first about the effects/liking certain parts and then identifying techniques; it wasn't clinical …' and '[it] allows for a personal emotional response to the poem rather than a dissection'. The concept of approaching the poem through whether they 'liked' it helped some trainees. One suggested that 'it is important to consider the driving force behind the poem because that means quotes/techniques can be analysed from that viewpoint once the student has felt that emotion themselves', and another that considering whether they 'liked' it helped to focus 'on the emotions not the techniques', and that that 'it focussed my thinking to pin point specific quotes'.

One group spent some time considering the use of the word 'moonlight' and discussing its connotations of romance but also of darkness and madness ('lunacy'); another group talked about the metaphor of snow falling on words, of them becoming frozen and immobile, still there but lacking any animation; two groups were concerned with the line, '"If I should call you by another's name" and the powerful emotions of that situation.

For some trainees, the move to analysis of elements of text interfered with their responses. One described how she was 'less able to access the emotion of the poem when considering specific techniques', another that it 'became mechanical' and that she 'became emotionally detached', and another that '[identifying] literary devices got in the way of emotion'. One described rather differently that 'after writing a private response I felt more removed from the class and did not want to share whether or not I liked it or to discuss the techniques as the poem felt very personal to me.'

5.   Homework

Reflective prompts:

Would you personally do this homework (Now? As a child?)? Do you think any/some/most pupils would?

Why set 'trust' homework such as this when it is open to exploitation?

Trainees' responses to this were polarised. Some felt that there was no point to it for the students: 'I don't think students would do this unless they were interested in the subject', 'If I had tried hard I would feel cheated out of a mark for it', and 'I think it would want validation as a student', and some that it had no purpose from their viewpoint as teacher: 'If it's not being marked, what's the point?' and 'It isn't something that would fit into the Scheme of Work and my school's Homework Policy.

Other trainees felt there was validity to this approach, even though many seemed unsure how many students would actually do the work, suggesting that 'it will only be done by an enthusiastic minority'. Others were more optimistic: 'I think after enjoying the poem from class [they] would [be] more likely to do this' and 'I think at KS3 most pupils would do it'. Some saw an inherent value in the fact that the work was not to be checked, suggesting that 'it shows that you respect and trust them' and that 'the element of trust is important in a lesson such as this'. The idea of personal responsibility appealed to some trainees, who believed that 'those students who do the homework will benefit', that it 'would inspire learners to find things out for themselves' and that 'it gives them a choice and encourages them to do their own reading and research without turning it into assessed work'. There was some indication of a wider purpose than exam preparation in some trainees' responses to this KS3 lesson, and to the issue of un-checked homework in particular. One indicated that it might 'encourage a love for the subject' or that it might help students 'to realise that you're trying to foster an interest in the subject'. Another trainee gave an opinion that 'if the class has been engaged in the lesson, I can see that they would do the homework' and another suggested, 'I think because it was an emotionally engaging lesson which would probably be the most memorable of the day. I would trust them to do this.'

Discussion

What emerges from the trainees' responses to this session is their perceived disconnect between engagement with the text and teaching/learning. There is a striking schism in their perceptions between an emotional response to the poem and analysis of the language of the poem, as if they believe that appreciation of how the poet has achieved impact will lessen that impact. There is also a distressing conflict evident in their attitudes between learning and assessment, as mirrored in the title of this study.

There is plenty of evidence that the trainees enjoyed authentic engagement with this poem. Their use of language such as 'powerful', 'immersive', 'personal', 'immediate' and indeed

'authentic' reflect their reaction to it. Indeed, for some the experience was so immediate that it felt uncomfortable, and the comment that it was 'like reading someone's diary' reflects the intimacy of the experience. Similarly, the opportunity to reflect on a personal response to the poem was clearly appreciated by many of them; 'space', 'truthful', 'liberating', 'worthwhile' all suggest a depth of response and a recognition of an inherent value to the activity.

However, there is worrying sub-text that many of the trainees did not regard the role of supporting this opportunity for authentic engagement with the text as 'teaching'. The response that it wasn't 'useful for the lesson' suggests an agenda where engagement with a poem is a currency: is it not useful within a lesson context? Is it not useful, perhaps, in exam marks terms?

This attitude is reflected in more specific comments such as those around assessment. There was a strong perception by some trainees that pupils would feel 'cheated' if any work they did were not marked or graded in some way. There seemed to be genuine confusion in trainees who asked, 'What's the point?' Equally, some were already so driven by their placement schools' Schemes of Work that they perceived no place for a response to a text that does not fit that proforma.

This conflict between understanding the poem at a level of response and understanding it as it is created is apparent in the trainees' responses. They repeatedly separate 'emotion' from 'technique'; it seems that to them the effect of the poem and how that effect is produced are somehow dichotomous. They talk about being less able to access the emotion of the poem when looking for poetic techniques, about literary devices 'getting in the way' of emotion and of how considering how the poet has used the words of the poem becomes 'mechanical', 'clinical' or an act of 'dissection'. There is a strong impression given that they understand an exam-driven need to teach poetry through this act of dissection, and they seem largely cynical about a concept that authentic engagement with the poem can be an act of learning in itself.

Interestingly, some trainees were able to recognise a wider value in the lesson, including elements such as trust in their pupils, the opportunity to inspire, to give choices and to support an interest in the subject of English. Sadly, though, this seems for many of these trainee teachers to be an objective that conflicts with their perception of their teaching role. There is something rather sad in one trainee's belief that a lesson such as this would be 'the most memorable of the day'; it would be memorable, presumably, because different from that which pupils routinely experience.

Conclusion

The lesson was followed up three weeks after the initial session. Trainees were, finally, given sight of the text of the poem and were asked how they felt about it. All indicated that they would feel confident to both write about it themselves and to teach it after the previous session. Indeed, they greeted the text with real affection (I had chosen a poem that is not available on the internet; a number of them, it transpired, had been trying to find it) and had to be dissuaded from photographing it on their phones to take away with them.

All of the trainees who had been in the initial session now responded enthusiastically to the pedagogy as learners, indicating responses such as that it had been a 'wonderful way to learn about poetry', 'an interesting way to interact with the tone and emotional impact of the poem' and a 'really effective way into the poem'. They used descriptors such as 'engaging' and 'thought-provoking' and indicated that they believed the approach had encouraged thinking, questioning and debate.

Nevertheless, there remained some hesitancy regarding using an approach such as this as teachers. One suggested that she believed it 'could be problematic for some types of [learners]' and that use of the approach would have to 'depend on the group'. Another that it was 'something different to how we currently [teach] poetry'. Despite their own experience of the authentic engagement with the text as being positive and productive, there remained a hesitancy as to its validity within the classroom context. This was summarised by the response by one trainee that the approach might make 'a good … starter'. Despite their experience of the text, their engagement with it and their appreciation of it, it seems that the trainees in this study remain sceptical about the value of such a non-reductionist approach to the teaching of poetry in school, especially in the context of perceived time pressures to fulfil examination requirements. This article aimed, as one of its objectives, to question 'whether experience of an authentic engagement lesson, and reflection on its usefulness, has any impact on the trainees' teaching practices'. It seems the answer may have to be that it does not.

This resonates with other recent findings, that there continues to be a pedagogy within English teaching where 'meaningful explorations of literature are often replaced with activities focused on assessment objectives, timed exam question drills and teacher-led explanations' (Cushing, 2018). Nor has this been without scrutiny; as far back as 2012, Ofsted was highlighting the dangers of 'an inappropriate emphasis on practising the GCSE

skills too early in Key Stage 3 'and their perception of 'weaknesses in the teaching of poetry, including an emphasis on analytic approaches at the expense of creative ones' (Ofsted, 2012, p.44). Perhaps the new Ofsted framework due to be published in September may support a move away from routine assessment and data gathering (Smith, 2018) and may reassure teachers that there is capacity within the curriculum for more creative lessons. In the meantime, discussion on the role of English teachers and of perceptions of what English subject teaching does and should involve will remain a central part of Initial Teacher Education.

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